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Wednesday, 25 July 2007, 10 a.m.

New York

President:	Mr. Wang Guangya	(China)
Members:	Belgium	Mr. Verbeke
	Congo	Mr. Gayama
	France	Mr. De La Sablière
	Ghana	Mr. Christian
	Indonesia	Mr. Kleib
	Italy	Mr. Spatafora
	Panama	Mr. Arias
	Peru	Mr. Voto-Bernales
	Qatar	Mr. Al-Nasser
	Russian Federation	Mr. Dolgov
	Slovakia	Mr. Burian
	South Africa	Mr. Sangqu
	United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland	Mr. Johnston
	United States of America	Ms. Wolcott Sanders

Agenda

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

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07-43774 (E)

The meeting was called to order at 10.10 a.m.

Adoption of the agenda

The agenda was adopted.

The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question

The President (*spoke in Chinese*): In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I shall take it that the Security Council agrees to extend an invitation under rule 39 of its provisional rules of procedure to Mr. Michael C. Williams, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General.

It is so decided.

I invite Mr. Williams to take a seat at the Council table.

As this is the last time that Ambassador Jean-Marc de La Sablière will participate in the deliberations of the Security Council in his capacity as the Permanent Representative of France, I wish to take this opportunity to express to him, on behalf of the members of the Council, our appreciation of him as both a colleague and a friend. Ambassador Jean-Marc de La Sablière has devoted a total of 13 years, in three different assignments, to representing France at United Nations Headquarters. He will likely best be remembered as having ably led yearly missions of the Security Council to Central Africa, most recently that to the Democratic Republic of the Congo as part of the Council's mission to Africa last month. Ambassador De La Sablière has also made an important contribution through his active chairmanship of the Working Group on Children and Armed Conflict.

In bidding Ambassador De La Sablière a fond farewell, the others members of the Council and I would like to say that we wish him every success in his new endeavours. Bon voyage.

Mr. De La Sablière (France) (*spoke in French*): I would like to thank you, Mr. President, for your kind and friendly words addressed to me on the occasion of my last appearance in the Chamber. I am very touched. With your permission, I should like to say a few words to the Council.

First of all, it has been an honour for me to represent France at the Security Council for almost five years in order to defend its positions and put forth its initiatives for world peace and security. It has been a rewarding task.

I think that we who meet in this body know well that we live in an unstable world in which old and new threats to peace and security can build up in a dangerous way. Crises, internal and regional conflicts, the protection of civilians and children, terrorism and the risks posed by the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction call for active international cooperation, a strong United Nations and a Security Council able to live up to the responsibilities entrusted to it by the Charter.

The Council's work is difficult and — perhaps not always, but often — is successful in both the short and long term. I would also add that the Council, acting on behalf of the international community, is never as strong as when it is united. That is why France endeavours to promote consensus on, or broad support for, a good text as much possible.

A spirit of cooperation in the Security Council, which I have always enjoyed, is crucial, and I would like to thank colleagues and their missions for it. I thank them for the quality of our personal relations and friendships.

In conclusion, I would also like to thank the Council's secretariat, which supports us in our work, including translators, and the interpreters — who I hope have not suffered too much throughout the years due to the cadence of my speech.

The President: I would like to thank Ambassador De La Sablière for his touching words on the work of the Council and the good working relations among colleagues.

(*spoke in Chinese*)

The Security Council will now begin its consideration of the item on its agenda. The Council is meeting in accordance with the understanding reached in its prior consultations.

At this meeting, the Security Council will hear a briefing by Mr. Michael C. Williams, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process and Personal Representative of the Secretary-General, to whom I give the floor.

Mr. Williams: May I join you, Mr. President, in expressing best wishes for the future to Ambassador Jean-Marc de La Sablière. I would also like to thank him for his unstinting personal support for the work of the United Nations in the Middle East.

Since my last briefing to the Council, there have been a number of important political developments giving cause for hope. Most notable is the re-engagement of the international community and Israel with the Government of Prime Minister Salam Fayyad. On 25 June, President Mubarak of Egypt hosted a summit at Sharm el-Sheikh that included Prime Minister Olmert, King Abdullah II of Jordan and President Abbas. On 16 July President Bush made an important speech announcing a series of measures of support to the Palestinian Government, leading to an international meeting in the autumn to be chaired by Secretary of State Rice. Most encouraging is that, on 16 July, President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert had a very positive bilateral meeting that touched on final status issues. That was their first meeting in three months. Last week, on 19 July, the Quartet met in Lisbon, together with its new special envoy, Mr. Tony Blair. Today, the Foreign Ministers of Jordan and Egypt have arrived in Israel to discuss the Arab Peace Initiative.

That is impressive diplomatic momentum, but the positive developments are offset by a problematic and increasingly complex reality on the ground, where violence continues. The situation in the Gaza Strip has stabilized somewhat since my last report. Hamas is in control of Gaza and has detained political opponents and those whom it accuses of collaboration with Israel. At least two men have been killed while in Hamas captivity, and local Palestinian human rights groups have made allegations of torture.

BBC journalist Alan Johnston, who had been kidnapped by the Army of Islam, was released on 4 July. The Secretary-General expressed his profound relief at the release of Mr. Johnston, who had been held for nearly four months. Hamas subsequently detained 12 members of the Army of Islam and affiliated Islamic groups said to be behind the kidnapping of Johnston and recent attacks on such targets as the American School and a Christian bookshop.

In this reporting period there were more than 20 incidents of Palestinian attacks, involving 192 rocket and mortar shells, against the Gaza crossings and into Israel. The military wing of Hamas has been responsible for most of the rockets and mortars fired at the crossings, and it claimed responsibility for 10 attacks aimed towards Kerem Shalom and 5 aimed towards Erez. However, Islamic Jihad and the Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigade also carried out attacks against the crossings. Islamic Jihad was also responsible for most of the rockets and mortars launched against Israel, with Hamas claiming responsibility for only one such attack during the reporting period. The Secretary-General has repeatedly condemned Palestinian rocket fire, which targets civilians — causing injuries and damage — and impedes the flow of assistance to the people of Gaza.

According to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), Israeli military actions continued throughout the reporting period, leading to 52 Palestinian fatalities, including four children, and 109 injured, three of whom were children. Thirty-three of those fatalities were in Gaza. One Israeli was killed and 18 injured, including one child. The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) continued targeted killings in Gaza. In the West Bank, the IDF carried out almost daily arrest raids into towns and villages, killing some 20 Palestinians and arresting at least 244 suspected activists from various Palestinian factions. I encourage Israel to cease those operations and to hand over security control of the West Bank to the Palestinian Authority.

The Hamas takeover of Gaza and the absence of Palestinian Authority (PA) security forces have left the crossings connecting Gaza with the outside world mostly inoperable. The Secretary-General has stated his concern about that situation and its impact on economic life, most notably in a statement on 13 July. He believes that it is essential for the Palestinian Authority to do everything possible to ensure the well-being of the Palestinians of Gaza. The United Nations encourages the PA to work with Egypt, Israel and the international community to explore all possible options to operate the crossings.

United Nations agencies have redoubled their efforts with Israel and the Palestinian Authority over the past month to facilitate and ensure the continuous flow of basic humanitarian goods through the Kerem Shalom crossing. Overall, 65,000 metric tons of basic food and medical supplies have entered the Strip commercially or through the United Nations, meeting 88 per cent of the population's basic minimum food needs.

However, it is clear that humanitarian assistance alone will not be sufficient to stop the decline in the economy that is currently unfolding owing to the interruption of regular commercial flows to and from the Gaza Strip. The closure of the Karni crossing since early June has meant that agricultural and industrial products destined for markets in Israel, the West Bank or farther afield have not been exported. It has also meant that materials essential for the production of industrial goods and for the construction sector are not entering Gaza. For the United Nations alone, that has resulted in projects worth $213 million coming to a halt. The World Bank now estimates that more than 75 per cent of Gaza's factories have had to close operations and that more than 68,000 workers have been temporarily laid off. Unless the crossings are open for imports and exports, the downward economic spiral will lead to extensive hardship for an already impoverished Gaza Strip.

It is particularly worrying that very little progress has been made to resolve the question of approximately 6,000 Palestinians who are unable to move from Egypt back into the Gaza Strip. I would urge all parties to act quickly to hasten the return of that displaced population.

I turn now to developments on the political front. On 13 July, Prime Minister Fayyad's emergency Government was reappointed as a caretaker Government that will continue to function until there is a vote in the Palestinian legislature terminating its tenure or until elections are held. The Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC) has tried to convene on a number of occasions, but, owing to alternate boycotts by both Hamas and Fatah, no sessions have been held. The continued Israeli detention of 45 Palestinian legislators is an aggravating factor, and we join the European Union in calling for their release. As a result of those obstacles, the PLC failed to meet the Basic Law deadline for a vote of confidence on the emergency Government, as had been requested by Prime Minister Fayyad.

On 16 July, President Abbas called for early presidential and PLC elections. However, there has been no indication as to when such elections might be held, and it is not clear how or when the current impasse will be resolved. I must note that my own meetings in the region suggest that there are no immediate prospects for reconciliation between Hamas and President Abbas's Fatah movement.

The creation of the independent emergency Government of Prime Minister Fayyad on 15 June, which was warmly welcomed by Quartet members, has led to the renewal of direct financial assistance from the donor community. Prime Minister Olmert has made commitments to support the new Government of Prime Minister Fayyad through transferring tax revenues, significantly freeing movement in the West Bank, renewing economic and security cooperation and releasing some Palestinian prisoners. In that regard, Israel transferred $117 million in Palestinian tax revenues on 1 July and released 255 Palestinian prisoners on 20 July. I am pleased to note the positive and businesslike way in which Israel and the Palestinian Authority are working together.

In a step that will help Prime Minister Fayyad on the ground, the PA and Israel also reached an agreement that led to 178 wanted militants giving up their arms and signing peace pledges in return for being removed from Israel's most-wanted list.

I would like to commend Prime Minister Fayyad's successful effort to pay full salaries to 160,000 PA employees in the West Bank and, in particular, in the Gaza Strip as well. This is the first time in 15 months that a full salary payment has been made to civil servants. It has injected more than $100 million into the Palestinian economy, and its effects on the daily welfare of Palestinian households were immediately felt. I should note that salaries were not paid to the 20,000 members of the Hamas-affiliated security forces or the 11,000 civil servants hired by Hamas in the past year.

As part of this positive atmosphere of trust, and in a step welcomed by the Quartet, President Abbas and Prime Minister Olmert met on 16 July and renewed their bilateral dialogue at a very positive meeting. I am informed that all issues were put on the table, from prisoners to serious discussion on final-status issues.

In a significant speech on 16 July, President Bush supported Palestinian institution-building ahead of serious negotiations towards the creation of a Palestinian State and announced the intention of the United States to call an international meeting this autumn chaired by Secretary Rice, with the participation of Israel, the Palestinians and regional States. The Secretary-General welcomed that proposal. As for the Quartet, it indicated in Lisbon last week that it was looking forward to consultations as the meeting

is prepared and agreed that such a meeting should provide diplomatic support for the parties in their bilateral discussions and negotiations in order to move forward on a successful path to a Palestinian State.

The process of institution-building will be led by the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who was appointed as Quartet Representative on 27 June. On 19 July, the Quartet welcomed his agreement to be the Quartet Representative and discussed with him the urgent work that lies ahead. The Quartet urged the parties and all States in the region to work closely with Mr. Blair and encouraged robust international support for his efforts.

Mr. Blair is returning from the region today after consultations with Palestinian and Israeli leaders and stakeholders. His initial visit was to form an assessment of the current situation before returning to the region in September to start implementing his strategic plan ahead of the international meeting in the autumn. The Secretary-General and our Quartet partners are all committed to giving Mr. Blair all the support necessary to ensure the success of his mission.

In that context, we welcome Norway's proposal to reactivate the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, with the stated support of President Bush and others in the international community, to discuss assistance management, financial support to the PA and Palestinian institutional reform. The meeting will take place in New York in September on the margins of the General Assembly.

Let me turn now to Lebanon. Lebanon continues to face a precarious political and security situation. The Council has already been briefed on the two terrorist attacks in less than a month that targeted the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), as well as on the status of the investigation.

In Beirut, the political impasse remains, with no tangible shift in the position of the parties. On 14 and 15 July, France hosted a meeting of Lebanese political figures representing participants in the Lebanese National Dialogue. That important initiative created a forum in which basic political principles and commitments were reaffirmed and participants pledged to avoid violence in resolving their political differences.

We support the commendable and continuing diplomatic efforts of France and those of the Arab League to assist the Lebanese in achieving consensus. The Secretary-General's Special Coordinator for Lebanon has remained in close contact with the parties and has continued to advocate for a return to dialogue and for compromises in order to narrow the gaps between the parties. The Secretary-General calls on Member States in the region to support the Lebanese parties in their efforts to reach a consensus.

The Lebanese Army continues its intense battle against the militant organization Fatah al-Islam in the Palestinian refugee camp of Nahr el-Bared in northern Lebanon. The fighting, which erupted on 20 May, has now claimed the lives of 114 Lebanese soldiers, at least 47 fighters from Fatah al-Islam and an unidentified number of civilians. On 6 July, two Palestinian demonstrators died in a confrontation with the army. The army and certain Palestinian factions have taken steps to prevent the recurrence of such incidents and to minimize the risk of violence spreading to other Palestinian camps in Lebanon.

A major assault was launched on 13 July by the army against an estimated 100 fighters still remaining in Nahr el-Bared. In connection with this attack, Fatah al-Islam fired Katyusha rockets from the embattled camp on surrounding towns and villages, leading to the death on 17 July of one civilian.

Israeli air violations of the Blue Line have continued to occur and, during this period, have significantly increased. UNIFIL has recorded a total of 271 Israeli overflights during the past month. These overflights are a violation of Lebanese sovereignty. The Secretary-General calls upon the Israeli authorities to make full use of the appropriate tripartite mechanism that exists with UNIFIL in which to address issues of concern.

In conclusion, following the collapse of the National Unity Government, the Palestinian Authority under President Abbas remains the only legitimate authority, and I have been pleased to see the quick response of the international community to deliver financial assistance and political support to Prime Minister Fayyad's caretaker Government.

However, it is important that the people of Gaza not be punished for the Hamas takeover. Re-opening the crossings to prevent the complete collapse of the Gazan economy remains a priority. The humanitarian and emergency response has been an effective short-term measure, but a solution led by President Abbas is

an urgent necessity. In the longer term, Gaza and the West Bank cannot remain separated. There is only one future Palestinian State, and it encompasses both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

There has been a promising start to the new relationship of Prime Minister Olmert, President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad. We must encourage the parties to continue to build confidence through the fulfilment of their Road Map commitments. Israel must remove checkpoints in the West Bank as well as dismantle outposts and freeze settlement expansion. President Abbas should continue to work to end violence, disarm Palestinian militias and reform Palestinian institutions. Fulfilment of those conditions would constitute solid foundations for the international meeting this autumn, which will hopefully be an important step to begin bilateral negotiations for a just, lasting and comprehensive peace.

The President: I thank Mr. Williams for his briefing.

(*spoke in Chinese*)

In accordance with the understanding reached in the Council's prior consultations, I now invite Council members to informal consultations to continue our discussion of this subject.

The meeting rose at 10.35 a.m.